

An interview with Sidney Levin ①

SID LEVIN

An Interview Conducted by

Anita Wells

June 16, 1981

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NARRATOR DATA SHEET

June 16, 1981

DATE

Name of narrator: Sidney Levin

Address: R.R. 25, Box 11, Riley, IN 47871 Phone: 894-2972

Birthdate: March 2, 1914 Birthplace: Chicago, IL

Length of residence in Terre Haute: 59 yrs.

Education: Crawford, Fairbanks, Sarah Scott, Wiley High School,
graduated 1931

Occupational history: Varied; owned Corner Furniture Store
from 1936 through present date.

Special interests, activities, etc. _____
For additional information, see Terre Haute and Her People of
Progress, 1970, 136, 258. (Vigo County Public Library Special
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06-16-81		Corner Furniture Store Terre Haute, IN	Anita Wells

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SID LEVIN

Tape 1

June 16, 1981

Corner Furniture Store, 518 Wabash Ave., Terre Haute, IN 47807

INTERVIEWER: Anita Wells

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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AW: We're talking with Sid Levin at the Corner Furniture Store at 518 Wabash /Avenue, Terre Haute, Indiana/. This is Tuesday, June 16, 1981. This interview is for the Vigo County Oral History Project.

Sid, I like to start at the very beginning and have you tell us when and how you came to know Terre Haute.

LEVIN: Well, my first recollection of Terre Haute was when we moved down here from Chicago. I'm 67 years old and that was when I was eight years old. I was born in 1914 and we moved down here in 1922. My uncle, Ben Manfield, used to be in the mine and mill supply business here. And my dad was a tailor in Chicago and employment was pretty tough then. He had a chance to open a little tailor shop here -- established tailor shop -- so my uncle brought us down here to Terre Haute to get going. And he brought us down, I can remember, down old /Illinois/ Route 1 in an old Maxwell touring car. I used to laugh at it because later on Jack Benny used to always talk about his Maxwell, and we came down in one just like it. But I thought that was great stuff. It seems to me like it must have taken us at least 12 hours to get down here. And travel is so much different today. It's amusing to think back of how that was.

My dad had a little tailor shop there at 327 Ohio Street, and that was where the old Van Slyke Motors was where the Walker electric lighting place is now. On the east end of that building there's a little storeroom, and that's where my dad's tailor shop was. And that was right next to the old Sayre bicycle shop, where the attorneys' offices are now. That was Sayre bicycle shop. Vern McMillan was Sayre's nephew. And he used to work with his uncle, Mr. Sayre, and he started putting sports goods in there and then he grew. And of course, they later moved out to East Wabash -- or rather around 9th and Wabash -- and then they moved down to South 3rd.

And, of course, McMillan later became mayor of the city of Terre Haute. He was a very interesting personality. I used to call him Uncle Vern. And he . . . you gotta remember I was just eight years old, and I used to bring my bike around to their shop, and they took personal interest in me. And I have very many pleasant memories of those days. Another pleasant memory was different personalities in the town. One of them was Jerry Fitzgerald.

He was right next to the G.A.R. /Grand Army of the Republic/ offices between 2nd and 3rd and Wabash. They called it Jerry's

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LEVIN: Bakery. And Jerry had a heart as big as all the city of Terre Haute. He later became, I think it was County Clerk of Vigo County. Basically it was on a popular vote because everyone loved Jerry. And I know he wouldn't turn away any poor person that . . . and when we were kids we didn't have much money. Of course, my folks always gave us enough to spend. I'd always take a nickel down there, and he'd give me about a dozen day-old donuts or something like that (laughing) for a nickel. I'd say, "Whatta ya got day old?" And those were pleasant things to look back to.

And then there at the corner of 3rd and Ohio there was the old Owl drugstore. There was a man named Forbes, who later became a well-known druggist in town. Worked there at the Owl drugstore when he just started working as a druggist.

And Ed Tetzal was in that block. Ed Tetzal was a gunsmith, and he was pretty well-known throughout this whole area.

And then over across the street was the original Flora Gullick Boys' Club. And I remember going up there just as a kid when I was 8 years old, so that's (laughs) 59 years ago. I don't ever recall having a regular membership, but I'd go up there every once in a while. And it's nice to know that I have been treasurer of the Boys' Club for many years now, and when I was a kid, I used to think that was great stuff up there. And to think how much nicer our facilities are now at our present Terre Haute Boys' Club.

And there were landmarks such as Gus's lunch room there at the corner of the alley.

AW: What alley . . . what corner was that?

LEVIN: That's on the north side of Ohio Street between 3rd and 4th. There used to be a place called Gus's lunch room, and they'd give you a hamburger about as big as a dinner plate for a dime. (laugh) And when I think back to those old prices, you know, it just . . .

And then there was . . . one of the biggest tire dealers in this whole area was Sam's tire shop. He was in that area.

And then over across the street Herbert Mace started, you know, on 4th and Wabash. At the corner was Ed Hampton's drugstore. At the corner . . . let's see. That'd be the northeast corner of 4th and Ohio. It was very clean . . . the cleanest drugstore you ever saw.

AW: Was the . . . the old city hall was in that area of town, too.

LEVIN: The city hall was located at 4th and Walnut Street. It was on the northwest corner of 4th and Walnut. Right directly south of that across the street was the old Russell brothers drugstore. They later moved down to 7th and Seabury.

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AW: This was a very . . . the area we're talking about was . . .

LEVIN: Very active.

AW: Very active, but it was more of a small business area, not a large retail shop area.

LEVIN: They were all small businesses. My dad later moved to 27 South 4th Street. As I recall, on the corner was one of those old saloon-type rum places pretty well-known in the area, and the farmers used to come in and drink their buttermilk and so forth. That was before the days of liquor.

AW: During Prohibition then?

LEVIN: Yeah.

And next door to that was a barber shop. And next door was my dad's store. Next door to that was Polson hardware store -- a pretty nice little hardware store there. And next to that was . . . let's see, that was Security Loan Company. That was one of their first offices, there on South 4th Street.

And then there was another tailor shop across the alley there. He was known as Harry, the Tailor. I'm just going through the block as my memory recalls it. And next to that was Juergens hardware store.

AW: A lot of duplication. We had a lot of drugstores and a lot of hardware stores and all . . .

LEVIN: Oh, yeah. All small businesses, see.

AW: And did they do pretty well?

LEVIN: Yeah, they all did pretty well. Now, there was a grocery store across the street of 27 South 4th right near Mace's. And that was Shahadey's. And then they had a fella who had a restaurant there named "Slim" [John C.] Keith. "Slim" Keith must have weighed about 400 pounds. And they all used to kid him; and, of course, when you come around the corner there from Juergens, there used to be the Stahl china shop. And that Stahl china shop was the forerunner of the Cut Rate China that's on North 9th now.

AW: You mean North 13th?

LEVIN: When they sold out . . . yeah, on North 13th, yeah. And when they sold out, they sold out to Mr. Zoll. The present owner, Sam Zoll, was just a young kid then about 17, 18 years old and very energetic and always was a hard worker and did real well.

Then, next to that was Quinlan Seed store and a lot of people around here . . . the Quinlan family is still around here. That was Len Quinlan's family, and there was . . . Jimmie Quinlan and Mary Gertrude were

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LEVIN: the children. And, of course, they eventually went out of business. And, of course, there was the Savoy theater there. And I'm trying to recall these as I remember them.

AW: Did you go to the Savoy theater?

LEVIN: Oh, yeah, I've been to the Savoy theater.

AW: Did they have vaudeville there or were they just a movie theater?

LEVIN: No, no. That was just old western movies. Up between 4th and 5th on the north side of Wabash was the Fountain theater. They were owned by Kaufman's -- A.H. Kaufman owned that. And, of course, then they had the old Biel Cigar store in there on the north side of Wabash, oh, in that block I'm referring to. And years ago before Schultz & Co. took over 4th and Wabash, that used to be Myers Brothers. They were a clothing house. Then, let's see. On the south side of the street . . .

AW: Which street?

LEVIN: On south side of Wabash between 4th and 5th . . . well, the Corner Store was the old New Market Clothing Company. People named . . . was Cohen that owned that. And then there was Berkowitz Luggage store. They were there.

Then Smith's Department Store -- used to be Schultz & Smith's -- was an L-shaped store . . . then come with their store there. And part of it was on Wabash Avenue and part of it on 4th Street. They connected and they later took over the whole block.

Then next to that was Max Shower, clothier. That's where that Chairs Galore was. And there were a couple other little places in there. There was a . . . oh, a kind of a card parlor there. Max Barnaby had that. Many of you know . . . remember Max Barnaby.

And then there was a Greek candy kitchen. They called it the Greek candy kitchen. I think they were related to the attorney Sacopulos. I think they were related there.

And, well, I never did finish between 3rd and . . . if you want to hear about these (laughing) old places, I'd be glad to continue.

AW: Why don't we kind of stop that for a minute and . . . why don't you tell me about the atmosphere of downtown in the '20s up to the Depression time? What . . . you know, the atmosphere. Was it busy? Were there a lot of people? You know.

LEVIN: Well, there was a lot of people. You've got to remember in those days there was only one true shopping center, and that was downtown

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LEVIN: Terre Haute. Of course, they did have a shopping area up there at Twelve Points, too. But your basic shopping center for this whole area was downtown Terre Haute, so there were just a few major stores. The rest of them were all little shops, and they all drew a certain amount of traffic. And there were a lot of services. Like there has been groceries in downtown Terre Haute. There were a lot of restaurants and, for instance, shoe stores. There were probably a dozen different shoe stores in downtown Terre Haute. There were probably a dozen different jewelry stores in downtown Terre Haute. And dress shops, there were dress shops galore, see. And then little by little, some of the small outfits . . . for instance, Meis started many, many years ago as a small outfit. And they kept attaining more buildings and spreading out until they're one of the major shops of the whole midwest. Meis store, they've been good merchandisers. And, of course, we had Root's. It was an old store and they were wonderful merchandisers, too. And, of course, later Sears came in downtown Terre Haute. And one of the oldest stores was the old Herz store. And it was kind of modeled after Marshall Field in Chicago. I mean the general design of it when it was built was modeled after Marshall Field; and they had, oh, an exclusive type of clientele and clothing there. When you went there, you went there for real quality clothes. And they had a very, very good name through this whole area. We had some shops in this city that we can all surely be proud of.

And, of course, drugstores . . . there were loads of drugstores in downtown Terre Haute. Of course, the Gillis chain had about five in the downtown area -- four or five. And they were pretty active. And there was a drugstore at the corner of 6th and Wabash. I think it was called Kaufman. I can't . . . I don't get total recall on that. And the old Kleeman's store is where Montgomery Ward is now . . . I mean where Montgomery Ward was when they were at the southeast corner of 6th and Wabash. That was the old Kleeman store. It's now an empty lot.

AW: So, what kind of traffic did we get then? If this was the retail center for say a hundred miles, is that . . . would you say that was . . .

LEVIN: Yeah, we had a lot of traffic. We had a lot of traffic in downtown Terre Haute. Of course, there were a lot of people who took streetcars, see. In the old days, you had streetcars coming from all directions, and a lot of people come to town by streetcar. Not all . . . see families have two and three cars now. Families then, they were lucky if they had one car. So you didn't have the traffic problem that you do today, because a lot of it was streetcars. And many years ago they had the old jitney cabs in addition to the streetcars. They ran up . . . like streetcars run on 7th Street, the jitney cab ran on 8th Street and they both charged the same. That was a nickel for the fare. And you'd just wait at the street corner, and a jitney cab would pick you up. And that was another means of carrying people downtown. And, of course, people didn't object to parking and walking

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LEVIN: a few feet. Some way or other we're losing our eyes to television, and we're losing our feet to the automobile the way we are today. And, well, there was just . . . it just seemed to be a lively town.

Now, in our case, we sponsor the Halloween parade. That used to be a big thing, a big event in this city. Now, I hesitate to say this because we sponsor the Halloween parade today -- along with the American Legion. We have a pretty good parade with still quite a few getting enjoyment out of it, but in the old days there was blocks and blocks of paraders. Everyone taking part in it. That was a big deal.

Oh, there's a lot of different things going on in downtown Terre Haute. I can remember even (I shouldn't mention this) but even the old days when they had the Ku Klux Klan parades. And (laughs) I was very observative as a kid. I had observed things pretty good, and I recognized a lot of people by the shoes they wore. (laughs)

AW: (laughs) Would I be shocked?

LEVIN: So I'd say, "Hi, Charlie". I don't know . . . well, you would be shocked at some of the names. I don't think . . . let me say this. When I say they were in the parade, there were a lot of people that belonged to the Klan that had no hatred in their hearts for anyone. They belonged to it as a kind of a fraternal type of thing. And there's a lot of them that did have hatred. So, aw, you can't go around blaming this one or that one. I know many of our past mayors were members of the Klan so . . . and I wouldn't quote their names. But, some of those mayors were very good friends of mine, too.

AW: I think we have a pretty good picture then of what downtown was like.

Did it change in the Depression?

LEVIN: Well, I don't know that it . . . the big change that started coming to downtown Terre Haute was the fact that /the/ nation moves on wheels, see. And people . . . they say necessity is the mother of invention. So the necessity was a place for these people to park when they shop, so this created shopping centers.

It started out mildly. The first shopping center was /Hulman/ Meadows which is a local type of shopping center. And then the one up there . . . Mr. Hulman and his group created the one at Plaza North, and that was a much . . . that was more of a regional type shopping center. And, of course, then the other neighborhood shopping center is Southland. And, of course, the big one is down there at Honey Creek Square. I mean that whole complex in that area. And that is definitely /a/ regional shopping center which draws people from many miles and was a natural because of I-70 being right next to it. We've got a shopping center down there that we can all truly be proud of.

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LEVIN: So, there's room enough for a good downtown Terre Haute. Downtown Terre Haute -- contrary to what people think -- is still a nerve center of the city because they have all your legal offices in the downtown area. Your largest banking institutions are in the downtown area. And there's a lot of services in the immediate downtown area that you can't get at a shopping center. Of course, we're in a transition period. I think someday downtown Terre Haute may have a different complexion, but there will always be a downtown Terre Haute because there is a necessity for a lot of small shops plus a few larger stores in the downtown area. There's a necessity for all types of services -- you know, financial services and all the different types of services that a downtown area can offer. And so we will come back.

We're coming back slowly because there's been a lot of, oh, hesitation. I think we're too slow to take action in Terre Haute. We're too doubtful of each other. Whoever takes the leadership, they feel like they're out in an island because that means they're sitting out there in the middle where everyone can shoot targets on them. What we ought to do is get together, work plans, and then all work together in a way not to knock each other but to complement each other on things that are being done good.

There's a lot of . . . for instance, I looked at it even in politics. You get the idea . . . /when/ you talk to some people, they say all politicians are crooks. Well, that's the farthest thing from being right. There are a lot of good politicians in there. And when they do a good job, you don't . . . people don't say much about it. But if they do one little thing wrong, why you . . . they yell murder then. I'd say, aw, there's one good politician. He's been Democrat; he's been Republican, but he's a good friend of mine, Frank Walker, for instance. He did a marvelous job. People don't know what a good job he did when he was in that Auditor's office. Well, nobody knocked Frank much. But how many come up and complimented him? And we forget . . . we forget to do those things. Those are little courtesies that take a man who is in office and want him to continue in the office, if he's doing a good job. But they won't do it. I mean that's the way people are. And I'm not knocking the people because I'm one of them, too, (laughs) so . . .

AW: You've been one of the people over the years who's been standing out wanting something to happen in downtown, getting those arrows shot. Can you tell me how you first got involved in this downtown improvement proposition?

LEVIN: Well, they . . .

AW: When was that?

LEVIN: Well, I became . . . let me say this. I've always been interested in downtown Terre Haute because I've worked downtown since I was a kid.

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LEVIN: Downtown was my college and my university. I mean I learned everything I knew in downtown Terre Haute, and I've always been interested but was more or less on the sidelines. And then I became president of the Downtown Business Association quite a few years back.

AW: Do you know what year that was?

LEVIN: I think it was about 10 years ago.

AW: Nineteen /hundred/ seventy, around there?

LEVIN: Yeah, around in there. And I became interested in what was going on, keeping a little closer eye on it. I started going to meetings and so forth. And as president, I went to all meetings.

AW: (laughs)

LEVIN: But Mayor /William/ Brighton had started an improvement project for downtown Terre Haute. He created a gold ribbon committee. I wasn't on it, but it had a big meeting there at the Terre Haute House. And /it/ got everyone real enthusiastic and they were going to use federal funds. And what happened a little later is they never got the project off the ground. They were going to use it . . . about 25% of donated funds from the building owners and businesses in downtown Terre Haute. And they were going to try to use so much of the city's funds, and then they were going to use the balance in federal funds. And they had a formula all worked out. But during Nixon's administration things tightened up there, and he just suddenly chopped off on all help for urban areas, downtown areas, revitalization in that particular manner.

So, with that shutdown everyone kind of lost their impetus, their desire to go ahead. And there's a few people came to me and said there was so much enthusiasm and so many people were enthused and would be willing to donate, would I get into it and see what I could do. So, I went out and I had a little help from Arch Dunbar and one or two others. But basically we solicited about 90% of the funds, and we got to over \$200,000 in solicited funds. And then Mayor Brighton . . . things eased up on the federal level, and Mayor Brighton was willing to go ahead. We got ahold of the team of engineers out /at/ Rose-Hulman and they There's a group out there worked with us and worked with the city engineer, and we drew up a plan that we thought was pretty good. It had peninsulas of greenery, two of them in each block of the downtown area. It had new bus shelters at every street corner so in case of inclement weather, why they could be out there waiting for the sign to change. Then we had new walks and new curbings in all downtown Terre Haute. And that was our starting point of what was to be done. And, of course, along with coordinating traffic signals and many other But that, in essence, was to go from 3rd to 9th Street. And we had advertised for bids. And the bids come in under the wire and then the new group /Paul Pfister, Lou Meis, Dan Smith,

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LEVIN: Bob Boyer, Richard Schultz, and others took over headed by . . .

AW: How was that?

LEVIN: . . . Dr. John Logan /Executive Director, Terre Haute Civic Improvement, Inc./ Because . . . well, I think everyone that was involved in that meant well, but they felt like this was like tossing a bone to a dog in that they wanted an overall comprehensive plan. /They felt/ there had to be so much happen in downtown Terre Haute that this wasn't enough, and they wanted a more comprehensive plan. And they got ahold of Dr. Logan, who was then retired, and they were going to make him kind of a supreme commander of the whole thing. And they got started and they come up with this improvement of North 6th Street, which is actually a grand entrance to Indiana State University. And we all love Indiana State University. And this is meant in no derogatory sense towards Indiana State University because I think they're one of the biggest assets we have in this whole area. But . . . see, our original intention and the reason I went out and solicited money was to create a better climate for retailing in the downtown area. And this demonstration project that they did there spent as much money as we were going to spend from 3rd to 9th for the . . . It wouldn't have been, in a sense, as nice as theirs, but there'd have been a marked improvement all along the shopping area of downtown Terre Haute.

Well, that's just one of the the things wrong. I think they'll eventually get reorganized. Our present mayor, Pete Chalos, has a great, avid interest in downtown Terre Haute. I think he's shown this.

One of the things that's holding downtown Terre Haute back -- or was through the years -- is (I made mention before) at one time there was only one shopping center in this area and that was downtown Terre Haute. That made the land very valuable. So, the thing that makes land valuable is traffic and useability. Well, at one time this was without a doubt the highest taxable land, but it's still the highest taxable land. Although downtown may look depressive now, it's still the highest taxable land value in this whole area. And may I state that the land at 7th and Wabash across from the Terre Haute House where the parking lot is, that's taxed more than all of Honey Creek Square as far as land value /is concerned/ and all of Plaza North and Southland and Meadows put together -- that one little block there. It's a half a block. So that'll give you an idea by comparison. A child looking at the comparative values would soon tell you that that was unfair. So, if they get proper land values back here again, maybe it'll come back up again. I don't know.

AW: I want to go back to how you got started in Corner Furniture Store.

LEVIN: Well, for many years I worked there at . . . well, I went to Wiley High School and I got out of Wiley High School. I left town and went to Chicago, and I worked in a radio parts company. And then I worked as a delivery boy for a cleaning establishment up there, and then I worked in a glass factory. And I worked there for about a year-and-a-half or two and then came back to Terre Haute.

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AW: When was that?

LEVIN: Well, let's see. I graduated in /1931. I came back to Terre Haute in '33. And then I went to work for the old Banner Furniture store on South 4th. And then there used to be a Kay Bee Star style shop. I worked for them for a while. And then I went to work for Smith's Department Store, and then I went to work for Schultz & Co. And then right after that (I was about 21) I got married. My wife's people were in the furniture business, and they were where the Maytag sales is now. It was the old Silverman Furniture. I worked for them for about six months and I didn't like it, so I went back to work for Schultz.

I worked for Schultz's for about a year and I was doing pretty good there, but I was always trying to do something different. And I saw where different towns had these rent-a-bike service. You know where you'd rent bicycles. So, I went down there to that lot. That was part of the . . . well, part of the old Wiley High School grounds on Poplar Street. And I went down there. One Sunday another fellow and I built a big rack up there -- a rent-a-bike rack. And I got a kid to work for me. And I bought ten bikes from Guaranty Tire and Rubber. I knew the manager there, and he let me have the ten bikes for something like \$10 down -- ten brand new bikes. And I went ahead and paid those out. And I ended up the summer, I had about 50 bikes. And then I sold all the bicycles. And then I decided I wanted to go in the furniture business for myself. So . . .

AW: Just a young man looking for the right career, huh?

LEVIN: Yeah. I went down to 3rd and Wabash, and there was . . . there used to be saloon there on the corner. It was called Blacky Wright's place. (laughs) And I went down there, and I bought an old International truck that belonged to one of the transfer companies. It had a couple hundred thousand on it. But I bought the truck cheap. I drove it up to Chicago, brought back a load of furniture and started selling furniture there.

AW: What year was that?

LEVIN: Oh, 1936. And I started selling furniture and then my brother was in with Schultz & Co. And so, as my business got better, I . . . my brother went in with me.

AW: Now, which brother is that?

LEVIN: That's Milt; I only have one brother.

AW: O.K. And he's how much older than you or younger than you?

LEVIN: He's two years older than I am.

And, of course, we went in together and . . . Of course, I hadn't been in too long by myself. And he came in with me, and we built that

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LEVIN: business up through the years and kept adding on to it and adding buildings and remodeling buildings and buying buildings.

And the place immediately behind me, it was a tavern. And I bought that building from Al Strauss. And then there was a couple of other buildings there that I bought. And I bought the corner of 3rd and Cherry Street. There used to be right next to the firehouse a great big . . . well, it was a four-room building there. I bought it. So, I owned quite a bit of property right in that area. Of course, from there we moved down here, and we've enjoyed pretty good business. We haven't gotten rich off the business, but it's got a lot of the same old customers and families -- same old customers that we had 45 years ago. I've been here in business for 45 years, and we've enjoyed it.

I've enjoyed the city of Terre Haute; I wouldn't want to live anyplace else. And I've enjoyed the business we've operated. Along with my brother, he's enjoyed it just as much as I have, possibly even more.

AW: I suppose the name Corner Furniture was a natural then?

LEVIN: Yeah. I was going around trying to figure out what to call the place. Of course, there used to be a Levin Brothers wholesale house. And we were going to call ourself Levin Brothers. And we thought well, that isn't right because there's a wholesale house by that name, so we couldn't do that. And we thought of one name and another and I said, "Well, why not just call it Corner? We're on the corner and" There was a Courthouse, we could't call it Courthouse because the Courthouse Furniture was there at 4th and Wabash. So, we were the Corner Furniture. And sometimes some people get it mixed up -- Corner and Courthouse. You know because we're right near the courthouse, so they'd think of us there. So, there was enough business there for everyone. When I first went in, there was the A & I Furniture and Dave Hoffman's Furniture and (I'm talking about in that block area there) Wiseman's Furniture and the Courthouse Furniture. That was all in one block.

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AW: Now, of course, Corner Furniture moved and . . . what year did you move?

LEVIN: Well, we've been here about 25 years so . . . been in business 45 years. So we moved 25 years ago; you can figure out what that is.

AW: O.K.

LEVIN: Nineteen hundred fifty-five, something like that. Along in there.

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AW: [Nineteen hundred] fifty-six, somewhere around there, it depends.

And, of course, urban renewal played a large part in that. Can you describe the urban renewal process and what happened to downtown?

LEVIN: Well, urban renewal is simply this. They take blighted areas and tear buildings down in order to create new areas where they feel like these new areas will be more productive. And that's the right thing for any community, and they're doing it with federal dollars. And I'm certain that this west end urban renewal is an essential thing because those buildings were all real old buildings. In our case, we put a fortune in trying to keep our buildings up to standard. And, of course, it's impossible for you to get what you put into these things from the Urban Renewal organization because they do theirs on a basis of appraisal. Well, I know in certain cases I put on construction maybe \$40,000 extra in something because I wanted it a certain way. And Urban Renewal, when they're appraising, probably didn't appraise an extra \$5,000 for what I did. Had I left it in the old stage, I'd have gotten a few thousand dollars less, but I probably put in about \$75,000-\$85,000 in those old buildings down there. And about all they paid me for is what the original price I paid for the buildings plus a few dollars. So, I took a terrific shellacking. And then when you move from one location to another, why people don't ever know where you are. People . . . I don't care how much you advertise, they have a hard time finding your place. And that was called Corner Furniture. When we came down here, we didn't know what to do about the name of this place so we called it Mid-town Corner. People didn't know what the Mid-town Corner was, and it's just hard to get It was just like starting over again in a new business.

And it's hard to describe what you have to go through, because you're going through the same things that you went through 20 years before trying to get your business established. You're going through the same things again getting re-established in the new location. So, it was a pretty tough fight, but we moved down here because this is a half-block long building. It has five floors and a basement, so actually six floors.

I know some stores advertise that they're the largest store in town or this, that and the other. Well, if you take our square foot area along with the fact that we rented the two adjoining buildings -- the upper floors in those buildings -- why we've got more floor space than anyone in the furniture business in this area. And we do a good job. This place was designed . . . my brother kind of took care of the remodeling of this building, and he wanted it done a certain way. He didn't know whether to put these new metal fronts like they were using at the time. We decided to go ahead and sandblast the old brick and kind of renew the idea of what the building was. And this is a beautiful building, very well constructed building. We try to keep it right up to snuff and

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LEVIN: Of course, we had our own downtown revitalization when we came in here because we put street lights alongside of our building. And we put our parking lot . . . that was a mess. And, of course, we surfaced our parking lot, put greenery out there. We put new sidewalks in. And so we've tried to keep up with things as they should be. We're not without fault here and there but, basically, we've been honest in our attempt to try to make this building pretty nice.

AW: That area around 3rd and Wabash, 4th and Cherry, was near the red light district in Terre Haute . . .

LEVIN: Yeah.

AW: Do you have any recollections of that area?

LEVIN: Oh, sure, because I think practically everyone in the red light district traded at my store for some reason or other. A lot of them traded at other stores, too, but a lot of them still bought things from me.

Oh, there were old landmarks up there. I don't know whether to use names or not, (laughs) but I knew every one of them. There were all kinds of characters. I feel like my life was enriched a lot in knowing some of these people. And those people I traded with -- the oldtimers -- they were as good a pay as anyone would want, as far as I was concerned. I just kept my nose clean. If they come in and wanted to buy, they're the public as far as I'm concerned. And we served them the same as anyone else, which they should have been.

What I did try to do . . . for some reason or other, some business establishments -- very few -- knew there were a type down there that you could take advantage of if you wanted to as far as price and stuff like that /was concerned/. Now, I never did use that attitude. I treated them all alike, and they knew that. And it got so where some of them would want something, "send me down a bedroom set, what have you got?" I'd describe it over the phone. "O.K., send it down." They'd trust my judgment. So I had a lot of good friends. Now, their occupation's another thing, and that's for the moralists to decide whether they should be or not to be. That's not my judgment.

AW: Do you think the red light district then helped the business in downtown?

LEVIN: Well, it'd be a hard thing for me to say. I heard former mayor Lee Larrison mention it one time that he thought in a way it helped things downtown. And I have to go along with him. I'm not saying that I'm for prostitution or anything like that, but I can't see where doing away with that red light district has improved things too much because it looks to me like it spreads around to motels and all over. And from a moral standpoint, I don't know what we've gained. But I guess you have to fight against it because you know and I know that that is not the right thing. But you asked me a question if it helped business downtown. Yes, I think it helped business

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LEVIN: downtown. I think it helped the dress shops downtown, furniture stores, jewelry stores. And I think that it drew people from . . . it's a hard thing to say (I may get criticized for saying), but it drew people from miles around.

AW: Do you think Terre Haute was unfairly criticized as a sin city?

LEVIN: Oh, I would say we were unfairly criticized because you could go into any city . . . I know we got a lot of guff from the Indianapolis Star, which they have a right to. They're newspaper people; they have the right to print what they see. And you'd go into Indianapolis and get the same type of products over in Indianapolis, all over the city, as you could here in our red light district. So I'm not going to criticize them for printing what they think is right, but Terre Haute was no worse.

Now, Terre Haute, on the other hand, was a great church city. A lot of churches and a lot of fraternal organizations and so many things that are good. It's just like . . . you look at Terre Haute. It's like looking at a rose. You want to look at the flower; you don't want to look at the thorns. There's a few thorns on every rose bush. Look at the flower, and I think it gives you a different perspective. There are so many good things about Terre Haute and basically, I think the people in Terre Haute are friendly people, too. And I think time and time again they've proven where there's any kind of disaster or anything, the people (one sharp clap of hands) come right up and help.

So, I don't know. I'm not ashamed to say I'm from Terre Haute. As a matter of fact, I'm proud to say I'm from Terre Haute. And I'm glad my folks moved down here when I was eight years old. If I'd stayed in Chicago, I might have been in the mafia. I don't know.

AW: (laughs)

You were . . . I just want to touch a little bit on your community involvement. You said a while back you started going to the Boys' Club when you were eight years old. You're probably . . . they might as well consider you a charter member, I guess.

LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah, well . . .

AW: But why did you find it important to get involved in the Hyte Center and the Boys' Club and those type of activities?

LEVIN: Oh, I started getting active in organizations after I got myself established in business. My wife used to tell me that all I could talk about was my business, and I didn't know about anything else. I took inventory of myself and I thought, well, she's right. I ought to get active in other things.

And I got into the Kiwanis Club of Greater Terre Haute. I was a charter member there. They've been active for about 30 years. And I

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LEVIN: was one of the past presidents of that organization. And I got into the Fresh Air Camp with Emma Talley and that group . . . and Ruel Burns, when it was an old fresh air camp made up of clapboard-type construction. We decided to build them a new camp, and I went out and raised money for that.

And then I got interested in Temple work in my own Jewish Temple. And I served on that board for . . . and served as its president and vice president for about 25 years -- being on the board. So I served two years as president and about four years as vice president. And then I got into the Family Service Association, and I served as vice president in that office. I never was the president of that particular organization.

Then I was on the park board for 12 years. [Mayor Ralph] Tucker appointed me during his administration. I was president of the park board for four years. And being president of the park board, I was invited to meetings on recreation. Of course, I went down to a meeting down here at Indiana State. Mary Alice Banks invited me. That was [in] the Home Economics department, and they had a fellow by the name of Brent McGinnis (he was the administrator of recreation for the State of Indiana). We were talking about senior [citizens'] centers, and I got a little interested in it. So they appointed me on a committee to try to get a senior citizen center. I was very friendly with the Blumberg family. And so I talked to Ben Blumberg for many months and talked him into the idea of donating the old Orthodox Temple at 5th and Poplar for a senior citizen center. And he was to buy that from the United Hebrew Congregation and pay for it. Then I asked him to help finance the operation of it for a couple of years until we got on to United Way. And he did, and I was the first president down there at the Wabash Senior Citizen Center.

And, of course, I've served on a lot of these health organizations. I've enjoyed it. Muscular Dystrophy, I was head of Muscular Dystrophy. I worked on this United Cerebral Palsy. Worked on a lot of different things like that. And was president of the Downtown Business Association. So I've had my share of doing things like that. And about . . . let's see, 23 or 24 years ago I was appointed to the Indiana Commission on Aging. I've been on that commission longer than anyone who is on the commission, served more years on that commission. I served 7 years as its chairman. Oh, I'm vice chairman now -- one of the vice chairmen. I think I'm second vice chairman. But I've served as an officer on that.

And then I got involved in this TV station when we had WIL, Channel 38, with Bill Allen. Bill Allen and I got into that. And I went out and sold the stock for that. And then we had the stock fight with . . . oh, it wasn't a stock fight. It was a fight to get the license, FCC license. Went to Washington on that. Then they told us our two groups . . . George Foulkes' group was called Alpha Broadcasting and ours was Terre Haute Broadcasting. And they said for us to combine, and so we combined forces. We ran that station just about to the point of hitting near the break-even point, and we all ran out of money and we just gave it up.

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AW: (laughs)

LEVIN: But I feel like I was a part of getting another station in Terre Haute. It was costly for me. (laughs) What the heck? It's only money.

AW: I want to . . . I've got a lot of questions, and I think I'm going to have to be a little selective.

First of all, when you were an 8-year-old Jewish boy coming to Terre Haute, what was it like? What was the atmosphere and the Jewish community like?

LEVIN: Well, there was nothing wrong with the Jewish community. I used to have to go to what they call the Hebrew school right after regular school. We used to go out here to 12th and Mulberry (that's where the Redmen's hall was later). That was the old Orthodox temple; my folks were Orthodox. And then later that building was done away with, and our whole concept of the Jewish religion changed in Terre Haute. It leaned more towards Reformed Judaism or liberal Judaism, as they call it. Of course, I followed up with that. I was always interested in the Temple and interested in the teachings of the Lord. I was interested in other religions, because when I was in Kiwanis, I was head of that inter-church committee and making visitation to all different kinds of churches. I got interested into all different religions.

But I've always considered in my concept of things that religions are like a wagon wheel with the hub of the wheel being God and the spokes of the wheel being the different religions. They all lead to God, so it makes no difference. I think all religions teach you right and wrong and that's the main thing. It gives you conscience.

AW: But the . . . I guess I'm asking how the general community reacted to the Jewish community throughout the years.

LEVIN: Well, as far as I know, I went down . . . my first school I ever went to was Crawford School. And (laughing) I still have friends that I used to know down at Crawford School. Then I went to Fairbanks School, and all those people are lifelong friends. I didn't know anything about discrimination. Once in a while someone called me a dirty Jew, and I'd punch him in the nose. But they didn't mean it. They were just mad or . . . just like someone calling you an S.O.B. They don't mean it, so you punch them in the nose and walk away and be friends. I've never had any trouble with any one. I know there are people that have hatred in their hearts for blacks or Jews, for this one and that one and the other. But I feel sorry for those people because they're missing so much out of life because all life is built on love. And that hatred . . . when you get hatred in your heart, the only one that loses by it is yourself.

AW: So, as a community Terre Haute was . . . would you say "open" to the Jewish community?

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LEVIN: Yes, I think they were. Oh, there were some groups that . . . I've got a different idea on that. There were some groups that would discriminate against Jewish people but on a private basis. There wasn't a public deal. And I think in a sense it isn't right, but I think one of the freedoms that we have is . . . especially in private, is the right to discriminate. You can pick your own friends, can't you? And I never thought too much about it.

I know if it had been a big issue, it'd made a bad impression on me and it never did. And I know it didn't for my brother. Our old neighborhood . . . we lived 1820 South Center, and, God, there must have been . . . in a two-block area there must have been 50 kids. And we're all lifelong friends. I just had a fellow in from San Diego the other day. Tom Barnhart's his name. He's got a sister who lives here. Whenever he comes in town, he comes in and sees me. I can name you countless people who stop in to see me that live up there in Wisconsin and other places. When they're in town, they come in here from all over the country. There're old friends that I knew since I was a kid, and they're lifelong friends.

AW: Well, you mentioned the Ku Klux Klan, and I was just wondering if there were any problems with that group?

LEVIN: Well, I never had any problems with them. I know that what they stand for isn't right. They're against blacks and they're against Catholics, against Jews, and But as far as I know, they never hurt anyone that I know about. I don't recall of any . . . I think there were some slight incidents of them smashing windows. I know back around the start of World War II there were some Nazis in town that were a pretty hateful bunch of stuff and put out a lot of bad literature.

But I don't remember the Klan's doing anything but they'd get up there in the North Terre Haute area and burn a fiery cross once in a while. I don't know that they damaged much property or anything like that. I'm against the whole concept of the organization and what they stand for, but I think a lot of people were duped into getting in there. You can't say every Klansman had hatred in their heart because I knew a lot of good (laughs) Klansmen. And I don't know why they belonged but I just feel like they got duped into it some way or other. I give them credit for having more sense than that.

AW: Well, I was just . . . the reason I went with that line of questioning was because I don't . . . you know it's very difficult in this community. There doesn't, at least to my benefit, seem to be any division between the Jewish community, the Catholic community and the Protestant community.

LEVIN: Oh, there was . . .

AW: In some towns, it makes a difference.

LEVIN: There was on the Country Club situation. But that's all been straightened out. And there's no use in going into things that are ugly in the history of the past and state why . . . you know, bring them

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LEVIN: up and start pointing fingers. Let's say they were wrong and a lot of the Jewish people were wrong.

AW: But it's all been straightened out?

LEVIN: Yeah.

AW: So, forget it.

LEVIN: Yeah, that's right. Live and let live.

AW: O.K.

Were you involved in any politics, aside from being on the park board and stuff, did you . . .

LEVIN: Well, this last election [1980] I ran for councilman at large. And I was beaten. I thought I'd carry it, but I didn't. But, well, that's the way it is. You win some of them and lose some of them. That's the only time I ran for office. I've been asked to run for office several times by several people for all different types of jobs including the mayor's job. But I have no political ambitions. I've helped. I'm a Republican, but I helped Tucker quite a bit during the time he was in office. And I was a great admirer of Lee Larrison. Why I felt like he had one thing going for him. He had sincerity and honesty, and he really worked at it. And I think he did basically a good job. Some people didn't understand him. Now, there's different ways of expressing himself and sometimes he did it in a kidding way and sometimes he meant it. But I always got along with him. I think he's a great man.

And, of course, when I got to working with Brighton, I didn't understand him either. And after I got to working with him, why he proved to be a perfect gentleman with me. So that's the way it is.

AW: Well, Terre Haute has a reputation -- whether deserved or not -- of having some nasty politics.

LEVIN: Well, I think . . . I think the place you have to go to correct things is right in your own heart. Now, we have a tendency to talk too much against Terre Haute, all of us, and a lot of us kiddingly. I'm talking about when you get a cab and the cab driver'll start knocking Terre Haute. You get on a bus and the bus driver (laughs) will start knocking the administration and this, that, and the other. This isn't true of all of them, but you know when you come in a store and a salesman will start knocking Terre Haute. I don't mean the salesman calling on us, the salesman that works for us sometime. They don't mean it, but things I mean that's the way I think we ought to just get ourselves reorganized and decide we're going forward and everyone say, "Well, I'm going to do everything I can within my power to see that things progress in Terre Haute. My lot may be little, it may be big, but I'm going to try to help." Terre Haute needs help, and I'm going to try to help. But I still think Terre Haute's the greatest place in the world to live. I guess the greatest place in the world to live is

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LEVIN: where your friends are, and I have a lot of friends. And I'm proud to say that. And I wouldn't want to live anyplace else. Oh, maybe, vacations or something like that.

AW: Is that . . . you're involved in the elderly . . . in the state elderly and the senior citizens.

LEVIN: Yes. Right.

AW: Is that why there are so many elderly people that live here?

LEVIN: Well, the reason there are so many elderly people [that] live here, their industry . . . there's not enough new industry come into Terre Haute to absorb the youths of the older people. That's as simple as that. Like, if you couldn't get a job here, you wouldn't stay in Terre Haute. You'd have to find someplace to get a job. You're not just going to loaf. So, I know so many of my friends have children, and their children have left town. They couldn't find any opportunity here. And there's only a certain amount of opportunity. We can only retain so many of our youth here if new industry doesn't come in, if we're not a growing community. So, a growing community starts . . . when it hits a certain point, it starts going the other way. And that's what Terre Haute's done.

Of course, Terre Haute can be likened to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Originally, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, their total industry was coal, see. And then when the coal mines kind of shut down, Wilkes-Barre kind of fell apart. And this was all railroads and mines and so forth. And when the mining industry mechanized and so forth, why the town kind of shut down. And then they immediately started getting by-products of corn and things like that, and it's made a comeback. And, of course, the biggest single industry here is Columbia Records and they've done a magnificent job for Terre Haute. They're a good firm. And how many people do you run into . . . they've been here a few years, say, "Boy I'm sure thankful we have someone like Columbia Records there." That's just like . . . I heard a preacher the other day talking. He says, "We're always asking the Lord for something. Why don't we sometimes just sit down and thank the Lord for the blessings he's given us? We have so many blessings we take for granted." So, it's the same way in that.

AW: Well, I think we're about done unless there's something else you want to . . .

LEVIN: No. I can talk (laughs) all night if you want me to. It's interesting to note all the many theaters that we had downtown in Terre Haute. I was just trying to remember. It started out at 13th and Wabash -- the Lyceum. And then there was the American theater. There was the Liberty theater. And then there was the Orpheum theater. Then there was the Grand theater and Hippodrome theater, the Indiana theater. And then

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LEVIN: there was the Princess theater. And there was another one in there. I can't remember it . . . Crescent. The Crescent theater. The Savoy and the Fountain, all in downtown Terre Haute -- (laughs) which gives you an idea.

AW: That was in that early period we were talking about before.

LEVIN: Yeah. Then there were, of course, magnificent hotels. The Deming Hotel was a magnificent hotel in the old days. It really was. And they had terrific food there, and you could cater parties. And when this new Terre Haute House was built, why it was wonderful. It still could be a wonderful hotel, but the disadvantage that I can see of that building . . . they built it so well. They didn't put temporary walls in there. They put all brick walls between the rooms. They're all brick, see. So that if you wanted to tear out walls, you couldn't make rooms larger. And they're building . . . all the hotels and motels have larger rooms today. So that's something to note.

I just note the growth of different companies here. Just think back of Wabash Federal, for instance; that's one institution which was over there next to Rogers Jewlery. And they've had wonderful management, and they built up great. It's interesting to note these different companies.

There's this company up on North 9th that makes the airplane parts. See, people don't even know about that.

AW: What's the name of it?

LEVIN: Tri Industries There's a lot of little companies around here that people just take for granted. And they ship to all the major airline companies and stuff like that. They're at 9th and Sycamore.

AW: We'll find it. Don't worry. We'll look it up.

LEVIN: Yeah. Well, can I tell you any thing else?

AW: Got any Tony Hulman stories? People . . .

LEVIN: Huh?

AW: Got any Tony Hulman stories?

LEVIN: Well, I only know Tony Hulman as a very, very interesting man. And I liked Tony because he never lost his touch for the common man. I'd say against him, I'd be called the common man.

AW: (chuckles)

LEVIN: Because I know once he surprised me. I was walking down the street -- Washington Avenue in Indianapolis. There came Tony Hulman and his chauffeur. Tony had him stop the car and talked to me there a little while on Washington Avenue.

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LEVIN: And another time I was at the airport going to Chicago, my plane was late. And he was having a cup of coffee with me. He had stopped in. He was waiting for his pilot or something. He says, well, we're going to Chicago. If you want to go, we'll take you. I mean that was very gracious of him.

I don't know. I liked the man very well.

AW: Did he do good for Terre Haute? Did he do bad for Terre Haute?

LEVIN: Well, I think Tony Hulman had nothing but good in his heart for Terre Haute. He could have donated all of his money to the city of Terre Haute and some people would say, why he's (laughs) just doing it for tax write-offs. He could have donated himself clear out of money and been a pauper and a certain amount of people would say, he's just doing that for tax write-off. I think he had Terre Haute in mind. I think there's some things that I would have done differently. But, of course, were he in my place, there's things I do that he'd have done differently.

AW: Well, there's some . . .

LEVIN: I have nothing but praise for the man.

AW: Well, there's some people that think maybe there was a little bit of control on Terre Haute to keep it from growing?

LEVIN: Oh, I don't think . . . I don't think Tony ever tried to keep Terre Haute from growing. I don't think he had anything but the best intentions for the city of Terre Haute. He was in management, and management has a different attitude towards union. And let's face it, this basically is a union community, and he may not have thought right down the line the same way they did, so there was a lot of criticism. But I've got nothing against the unions, and I don't think he did either, but I think he thought a little differently. And it's just the same as this big argument in baseball. The baseball players averaging \$135,000 a year, and I know if I was averaging that much, I doubt whether I'd complain about anything. But that's their right. And, of course, management's looking for their own interests. And so it all depends which side of the fence you're on.

AW: Well, I think we've pretty well covered everything, and I want to thank you for talking with me . . .

LEVIN: O.K.

AW: . . . on this.

LEVIN: It was my pleasure. I'm sorry my voice has been funny. I'm going to get something for it tomorrow.

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